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## WITH NO SLED HOCKEY CLUB IN TOWN, JEREME GILBERT MADE ONE

By Heather Rule, 12/18/17, 2:00PM MST

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### Without a team in Charlotte, only option was three hours away in Raleigh

Sled hockey player Jereme Gilbert moved from Texas back home to North Carolina, where he grew up, to be near his family. He quickly got on board with the Carolina Hurricanes sled hockey team in Raleigh.

There was just one problem.

"Charlotte is about three hours away," Gilbert said. "And I don't like to drive."

So, for about a year now, Gilbert has been in the process of starting a sled hockey program in Charlotte. They have five players on board right now.

Gilbert participated in the eighth annual USA Hockey Sled Classic, presented by the NHL, Nov. 16-19 in Plymouth, Minnesota as a defenseman for the Hurricanes in Tier IV division play. It's his third season with the team and second Sled Classic. Gilbert had one assist in the tournament; the Hurricanes finished runner-up in Tier IV to the Colorado Avalanche.

Gilbert started playing sled hockey with the Dallas Stars team when he lived in Texas. He had already tried a bunch of other sports before turning to hockey.

"I was about less than a year from my accident, and I wasn't in a very good place," Gilbert said. "And I found hockey, and I came out there and I loved it."

Gilbert has always been a competitive person, playing soccer, participating in triathlons and competitive mountain biking. But it was a mountain biking accident that left him a paraplegic. He joined the Dallas sled hockey team and was immediately taken in as one of the guys. He loved it so much that he reached a point where he was living each week looking forward to that one hour on the ice with his teammates.

When he returned home to North Carolina, he was certain Charlotte would have a sled hockey program. After all, the Charlotte metro area has more than two million people. No such luck. That's how he connected with the team in Raleigh, so he could keep playing.

"But it's not really sustainable with work to be driving up there spending my entire weekend up in Raleigh," Gilbert said.

Especially when the practice time changed from mid-day on Saturdays to 8 a.m. That wasn't going to work for him.

He set out to start a program in Charlotte, getting help from the team in Raleigh, the AHL's Charlotte Checkers and the owners of the ice rink in Charlotte. It's also been a nice perk to have the national sled team and development team with their home ice in Charlotte.

Gilbert's program — Queen City Sled Hockey — is growing, albeit slowly. Last April, Gilbert was still a one-man team, and now there are five players. They've hosted community events trying to get their name out there.

They've also had a lot of youth interest but didn't yet have the equipment for them. They packed them into adult-sized sleds with towels, foam and duct tape. A grant from LaBatt USA's Pass it Forward initiative helped provide some additional equipment for them, so they have some sleds that fit.

One of the bigger challenges is finding ice time. Ice is not readily available and the time is expensive with just three ice sheets in Charlotte. There's been another tough battle, too.

"Not a lot of people know about this sport," Gilbert said. "The thing that I never anticipated was that it was going to be difficult to find guys."

"And really, once you get people on the ice and they can experience it, we haven't had any trouble getting people to come back."

With Gilbert's competitive nature, he really enjoys having personal goals to work toward in sports. Sled hockey and this new program accomplishes that for him. Even when it was just him in Charlotte, he'd still go out with a stopwatch in his lap to see how quickly he could get from blue line to blue line or red line to red line on his sled.

His goal — "kind of a stretch goal" — is for Queen City Sled Hockey to participate in a tournament the Hurricanes host in March. They'd really like to participate in some of the Southwest Sled Hockey League games and tournaments in 2018.

"If I could do for one person what hockey's done for me, I would consider that a huge accomplishment," he said. "Just to be in service to something that's bigger than me, just gives you some pause."

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